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AUTHOR	Boethel, Martha
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ABSTRACT

Joint rural school-community projects are best sustained when developed by a collaborative group. The two basic dimensions of working collaboratively are team building and team planning. Critical elements of the collaborative process are: 1) community readiness--an assessment of community readiness should be performed, taking into consideration local leadership, collaborative experience, the complexity of the initiative, and the maturity of the organizations involved; 2) membership--since a broad base of community representation is critical to a collaborative's credibility, those outside the established circles of influence should be included; 3) leadership structures--leadership that suppresses group initiative should be avoided, and a shared leadership structure is recommended; 4) decision making--a shared, or consensus, decision making process is recommended, with subsets of the group making only limited, logistical decisions; 5) outside facilitators may be helpful if there is little history of community collaboration or there is a polarization or lack of trust among participants; 6) communication and conflict--participants must pay careful attention to the meanings they ascribe to words, and the decision making process should give participants permission to disagree and use conflict and its resolution as a constructive means of moving forward; and 7) accessing resources--start small and be creative. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory has a toolkit and guide for rural school districts to use in collaborative efforts. (Contains 11 references.) (TD)

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Benefits²

School Development
Community Development
Economic Development
Youth Development

THE EXPONENTIAL RESULTS OF LINKING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Issue Number Six

Welcome to Benefits²

Benefits² is a series of papers addressing ways that rural schools and communities can work together so that both will thrive. This issue, the last in the series, continues our focus on approaches and tools that can help to guide collaborative groups. The previous issue described eight basic steps in the collaborative process. This issue highlights specific aspects of collaboration that are critical to a group's success.

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Making the collaborative process work

If we adults are truly concerned about the future of our communities, our greatest task is to do the things that will help our children learn to enjoy living in their communities. . . . And, the best way to help them to love their home towns is to let them become fully involved in making good communities.

— Edwin C. Nelson, director of a Nebraska Community School Revitalization program

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If you've read any of the previous issues of *Benefits²*, you no doubt recognize that this statement reflects two basic premises of these papers: that rural schools and their communities depend on each other, and that, by grounding educational experiences within the real-world context of the local environment, schools strengthen student learning, self-esteem, and citizenship skills, as well as building community resources.

This issue addresses the series' third basic premise: That joint rural school-community projects are most effectively sustained when they are developed by a collaborative group. As described in the preceding issue, using a collaborative process can help to unify diverse perspectives, establish a broad base of support, and build the community's capacity for self-development. This issue focuses on the some of the most important elements to consider in collaborative work, and on some of the tools and resources available to help you.

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Joint rural school-community projects are most effectively sustained when they are developed by a collaborative group. Older students, like these Fabens, TX students, can be important members of collaborative action groups.

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The two basic dimensions of working collaboratively

For a diverse collection of individuals to develop into a cohesive, working group requires activities along two basic dimensions: team building and team planning. Team building is the process through which group members find ways of shaping an unwieldy bundle of individual ideas, interests, and needs into a well-focused purpose and plan of action that all group members can support. Team planning involves carefully assessing local needs and resources, identifying priorities, and finding manageable ways of addressing those needs.

Neither of these tasks can be hurried or skipped over if a group is to succeed in making a difference within the community. What's more, they need to happen — almost — at one and the same time. In the beginning, team building should dominate the group's attention; in later stages, planning will take precedence. But team building without planning is an empty process, while planning without team building is like asking a random set of strangers to suit up for the Super Bowl.

Most effective guides to collaboration include activities that are designed to help groups develop skills and cohesiveness as a team while they go about the business of planning and implementing school-community projects. (See sidebar on page 3 for a description of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's collaborative process and supporting materials.) As you consider the following "critical elements" of collaboration, keep in mind that each one requires skills and support not only in planning and development, but also in building an effective collaborative team.

Involving a broad base of community representatives is critical to a collaborative's credibility and success.

Critical elements of the collaborative process

Community readiness. Joint school-community projects, while they can be of great benefit, also place demands on all those involved. It is important to consider whether your local environment can support a collaborative effort. Readiness issues include leadership, commitment, management capacity, access to resources, and the capacity to take risks and to cope with controversy.

Most collaborative guides recommend, as does the Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.), a careful assessment of community readiness; such an assessment involves "looking hard at local leadership and collaborative experience, the complexity and risks of the initiative, the maturity of the organization[s] expected to carry it out, . . . and the availability of a sufficient resolve and patience to build effective. . . communication" among the individuals and agencies that need to be involved (p. 12). Resource materials developed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory include an assessment questionnaire you can use in helping to determine your community's readiness.

Membership. Involving a broad base of community representatives is critical to a collaborative's credibility and success. One guide recommends including people who bring "clout, commitment, and diversity" to the group (Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993, p. 25). While clout is important, don't make your group "top-heavy," or it's likely to break down in turf issues and conflicting priorities (White & Wehlage, 1994). Be sure to include teachers, students, administrators, parents, business and civic leaders, informal community leaders, and advocates; aim for diversity in age, expertise, ethnicity, and perspective. Though a big group can be unwieldy, Samuels, Ahsan, & Garcia (1995) among others, conclude that, "all things considered. . . it is better to start with too many, rather than too few, members" (p. 9).

Some collaborative guides, including SEDL's, suggest specific strategies for identifying potential members of the collaborative group. Whatever the process you use, keep in mind that, as stated in the previous issue, "It isn't enough to simply round up the 'usual suspects'" (U.S. Department of Education, 196, p. 13). Find ways of reaching far into the community and engaging those outside the established circles of influence.

Leadership structures. Many aspects of collaborative work involve a delicate balance, and nowhere is this more true than in the area of leadership. Especially in the early, start-up stages, a "small core group of leaders" needs to be active in order to "spark" the collaborative (Harwood Group, 1998, p. 2) and, specifically:

> to articulate the initiative, build the necessary consensus, manage the change process, weather the storms, and continually refine and redesign the effort without losing the community's support. (Casey Foundation, p. 11)

Yet it is also important to share leadership roles, and to avoid a leadership style that suppresses the group's initiative. SEDL staff, for example, have worked with sites in which a school principal or superintendent, as the main organizer and leader of the collaborative, consistently discouraged the group from presenting certain project ideas to the local school board. These administrators' intentions were good: they believed their school boards would summarily reject the proposals, and sought to head off conflict and frustration. The result instead was that the groups lost much of their enthusiasm for generating ideas—as well as opportunities to learn how to work effectively with the school board.

SEDL's collaborative process recommends a shared leadership structure—selecting as co-leaders, for example, a principal and a parent, or a teacher and a local business owner. Cathy Jordan, SEDL's rural development director, also suggests that school administrators consider taking a "behind-the-scenes" role. "Administrative involvement is critical, of course," she observes, "but it's sometimes more effective to step into the background and take a supporting role." Groups, however, must always keep in mind that schools—and especially the principal and superintendent—are the ones who are ultimately held accountable for what students do and for how school facilities and resources are used.

Decisionmaking processes. The group's approach to decisionmaking, too, requires a balance between efficiency and involvement. Regardless of who's leading the collaborative, all participants need to have a voice in the group's major decisions. Guides to collaborative work consistently recommend a process of shared, or consensus, decisionmaking. Consensus decisionmaking is "ideal for partnerships because the process requires thorough discussion of alternatives, allows all voices to be heard, and fosters commitment" (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 19). However, consensus decisionmaking can be time consuming, and it also requires some skill in focusing the discussion, assuring full participation, identifying alternatives, and suggesting compromises. SEDL's collaborative process, among others, offers tools and training to help groups and their leaders become skilled in using consensus approaches.

For efficiency's sake, the collaborative probably will want to empower a subset of the group to make some decisions, but these should be logistical, rather than substantive, decisions. Once the larger group has decided to organize a community cleanup, for example, a subcommittee might identify possible dates, make decisions about publicizing the event, and make arrangements for recruiting volunteers.

Whether and how to use an outside facilitator. An outside facilitator is by no means a requirement for a collaborative to work well. For some communities, however, a facilitator—a consultant from a nearby university, an educational service center representative, or a supporting agency such as SEDL—can help to fill gaps in energy or expertise. SEDL staff members have identified three major advantages to having an outside person facilitate group meetings:

- to help group members get comfortable with the partnership's diversity;
- to help diffuse divergent viewpoints and sometimes highly charged emotions; and
- to help the group maneuver through the complexities of project planning and development (Molloy et al., 1995, p. 4).

As a general rule of thumb one guide suggests that, "if there is little or no history of broad-based collaboration in the community, or if there is polarization or lack of trust among those who should be involved," a facilitator may be needed (Samuels, Ahsan, & Garcia, 1995, p. 10).

Handling communication and conflict. Nothing is more important to a collaborative's success than the ways its members communicate. There are several dimensions to effective communication within a group: sharing all relevant information with all members, maintaining frequent contact, and using effective communication styles—in other words, concerns about what's said, to whom, how often, and in what ways.

Making sure everyone understands each other is a basic concern. This may seem obvious in groups where some members speak predominantly English and others speak predominantly Spanish or another language. Several SEDL-sponsored sites, for example, now conduct their meetings in both Spanish and English. But even in groups where everyone speaks a common language, it takes work to reach clear understandings. In one three-year case study, for example, researchers found that members of a partnership group "used the same words but attached different meanings to them." These researchers conclude that, "without paying careful attention to meaning, people might be too quick to agree. . . and not realize the implications of their differences until they begin to act" (Corbett, Wilson, & Webb, 1996, p. 45). School staffs and other agency representatives, in particular, need to be careful of using terms and labels that carry specific assumptions within the profession, but may mean something else—or may seem meaningless—to lay persons.

Much of the concern about communication has to do with ways of coping with conflict. Collaborative groups tend to suffer from one of two extremes: disagreements that are so emotionally charged it becomes difficult to move beyond personal anger to practical

Resource information

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

The Creating Collaborative Action Teams: Working Together for Student Success Guide explains the Collaborative Action Team process and describes the five stages in the Collaborative Action Team process. A companion Toolkit provides a variety of "tools"—instructions, activities, resources, and information—that facilitators can use. Transparency and handout masters and a CD-ROM complete the set. Available in Spanish.

Thriving Together: Connecting Rural School Improvement and Community Development is a guide developed for rural school districts using the Creating Collaborative Action Teams materials.

Above materials will be available December 2000.

Making the collaborative process work, *continued*

agreement, or such careful avoidance of disagreement that the group is never able to tackle the difficult issues that must precede effective action. Groups need "a communication process that gives [participants] permission to disagree and uses conflict and its resolution as a constructive means of moving forward" (Melaville & Blank, 1991, p. 37). SEDL and other resources offer strategies and training activities for encouraging open, constructive communication.

Accessing resources. Many groups worry that, without grants or other kinds of outside funding, they will be unable to accomplish anything of significance. In fact, most guides to collaborative work urge groups to function as much as possible with existing resources; some even note that "too much" as well as "too little" funding can be a deterrent to effectiveness (Wolff, 1995, p. 4–46). Grant requirements can diffuse the group's purposes and activities, and lead to turf issues or inequalities in the power and authority of group members. Grant-funded projects, which generally have very tight timelines, also may have to develop more quickly and on a larger scale than the community is prepared for. And when the funds dry up, so does the program.

SEDL staff, as well as others, recommend that groups begin with modest goals and plans. If you're interested in establishing a school-based parent center, for example, it's not necessary to start with a building filled with staff and equipment. Instead, arrange to use a classroom or the teachers' lounge after school, and staff the center with a combination of student and community volunteers. As SEDL's Cathy Jordan observes, "the first step can be as small as plugging in the coffee pot."

Particularly with entrepreneurial projects, which may require the purchase of raw materials or equipment with which to operate a business enterprise, groups may need to generate some start-up funds. Again, however, it helps to start small, and to be creative. Many entrepreneurial projects raise money by selling "stock" in the business, with provisions for "investors" to recoup their funds if and when the enterprise begins turning a profit. Several SEDL-sponsored collaborative sites have generated funds by designing and selling t-shirts, holding raffles, or using other traditional community fundraising strategies.

Conclusion

Collaborative school-community projects require effort, patience, and, above all, new perspectives about what's important in teaching and learning. But rural schools and their home towns cannot afford to continue with business as usual. To survive—and more, to thrive, for mere subsistence is an inadequate goal—it is necessary to draw on the creativity and resourcefulness that helped to create these communities in the first place. The challenge before you may be great, but there are resources to help, in your own back yard and within the greater educational community. So take the first step; plug in that coffee pot, and let's get going!

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SEDL
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Wesley A. Hoover, Ph.D.
President and CEO

Joan Buttram, Ph.D.
Vice-President and COO

Catherine Jordan, M.A.
Program Manager, Program for Refining Educational Partnerships

To learn about the Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project, visit our website at http://www.sedl.org/prep/ruralcats.html.

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